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The Laboratory Approach to Organization Change: "Confrontation Design"

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This study reports one "spin-off" from the basic technology of sensitivity training, which is now widely used for inducing attitudinal and behavioral change in organizations. Changes in attitudes of members of a complex business organization are reported in this paper, and they support the value of the "confrontation design." Similar results have been obtained in other business and government settings.

This article provides specific research counterpoint to the summary description in an earlier paper[1] of the laboratory approach to organization change. That piece sketched the major properties of the laboratory approach, and particularly stressed the uses made of sensitivity training groups, or T-Groups. That article made two major points. Without question, considering personal learning, T-Groups are valuable vehicles for increasing interpersonal sensitivity, for demonstrating to individuals a sharper sense of what they need to function more fully and effectively, and for beginning the development of skills that permit individuals to attain more of what they desire in their interpersonal relations. Organizational applications of the laboratory approach were shown to raise more complicated issues.

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[1] Robert T. Golembiewski, "The Laboratory Approach to Organization Change: The Schema of A Method," *Public Administration Review,* XXVI (Sept., 1967), 211-221.

The thrust of this article is directed toward the complex issues of organization applications of the laboratory approach. The argument is basically dual. For some purposes, T-Groups are not the only or the unqualifiedly best vehicle in the laboratory approach to organization change. Moreover, designs can be developed which at once exploit the learning potential associated with T-Groups while they avoid many of their major drawbacks in large organizations.

Basically, this paper views the T-Groups as an ideal learning environment that need not or cannot be duplicated in many ways in the "real world" of organizations. Thus the intense interaction characteristic of T-Groups cannot (and, perhaps, should not) be generated in some organizations. At the same time, knowledge of T-Group dynamics can generate spin-offs of applied techniques useful in complex organizations.

The usefulness of seeking analogical spin-offs of T-Group dynamics suitable for complex organizations will be illustrated. The focus is on a program of change in a large business organization, the overall purpose of which program is to improve relations between several middle-managerial levels and functions. This paper deals with one spin-off of the laboratory approach used as part of this program of change, namely, the confrontation design. More specifically, this paper summarizes some of the attitudinal changes experienced by a diversified group of middle managers from the marketing area of a large firm who participated in a confrontation design. Similar results have been obtained in public agencies as well as in other business organizations.

INTERPERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PARALYSIS: A SIMPLIFIED CASE

A wide range of problems exist to which the T-Group and its analogs may be applied usefully. Consider only one way in which communication between individuals and their suborganizations can degenerate. A hypothetical but typical sequence of worsening relations between individuals A and B in an organization takes such a general form:

1. A does not *own up* to his attitudes or feelings toward B;
2. B, in turn, is less likely to *be open* with A;
3. A and B, consequently, experience a diminishing *mutual trust* as the number of unresolved issues between them increases;
4. a degenerative, self-heightening process can be set in motion as:
    a. A and B feel a diminished *interpersonal competence,* that is, as they experience an increased *risk* of recognizing and acknowledging their attitudes and feelings, as their *processes* for decision making become increasingly burdened by unfinished business, and as A and B consequently become less effective in *isolating and resolving substantive problems,* if indeed any such exist when decision-making processes function well;

b. A and B consequently feel diminished *psychological success* in solving problems that remain solved without creating other problems; and

c. A and B become *more dependent* on their superiors, with lessened openness and owning being associated with (for example) informing on peers or with "don't rock the boat" attitudes.

Now if A has a typical initial experience in a T-Group — usually two weeks at an isolated location spent working with individuals who are strangers — he very probably will gain valuable insights and skills in sensing and reversing such degenerative sequences in his relations with some C within the laboratory context. Thus A's self-esteem may be enhanced when he proves to himself he really can establish meaningful and authentic relations with others in a T-Group. Or A may sharpen his sensitivity to the early stages of degenerating communication sequences as well as augment his skill in dealing with them effectively. The other possibilities are numerous.

However, A faces many problems in attempting to transfer such new or augmented skills into his organization. He might reason: "If I could only get organization member B in a T-Group, he would see the light just as C and I did." The if is often a big one. Thus there are some things a T-Group can do poorly or not at all, when such degenerative experiences occur in organizations. For example, A's efforts to recreate in his organization the supportive environment typical of T-Groups may be frustrated for a variety of reasons. Typically, that is, degenerative communication sequences in organizations involve large numbers of people, diversely organized into units often having long histories of rivalry that might inhibit the intimacy and sharing characteristic of a T-Group, and each performing myriad day-to-day jobs that must be done. In contrast, "stranger" T-Groups typically involve only a dozen people or so with no past history, who will predictably go their largely-separate ways after training, and who have no task in the interim but learning about each other from one another. Or finally, some powerful organization figures might argue that the desirable consequences of a common laboratory experience for members of the same organization are outweighed by the risks involved. T-Groups can range broadly, after all, and a man in that context thus might say things harmful to his career that had no relevance to his work. A similar revelation in a stranger T-Group would involve far less career risk, in contrast.

AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALOG OF THE T-GROUP: SEVEN FEATURES OF THE CONFRONTATION DESIGN

The "confrontation design" attempts to capitalize on basic laboratory dynamics while doing what the T-Group in large organizations can only do weakly or not at all. Confrontation designs share an intent with organizational applications of sensitivity training, that is, but the two differ in critical ways. Although confrontation designs can vary widely in specifics, seven core features particularly distinguish them from learning designs using T-Groups.

First, confrontation designs involve as participants individuals who are hierarchically and/or functionally involved in some common flow of work. The attitudinal changes reported here concern four levels of the same marketing organization and some nine of its component activities. Immediately, then, the confrontation design seeks learning that has direct, on-the-job applications. In contrast, applications of sensitivity training in organizations often provide for an initial experience in "stranger" groups composed of individuals who do not know one another, or in "cousin" groups of individuals from the same organization who do not work together. Only after such a first experience, if then, is relational learning typically attempted in "family" groups of individuals who commonly do work together.

Second, confrontations involve two or more organizational entities whose members have real and unresolved issues with one another, e.g., "labor" and "management." In this case, the focus was on the relations between various headquarters activities and supervisors of a field salesforce.

Third, confrontation designs involve the mutual development of images as a basis for attempting to highlight unresolved issues. In this case, five Basic Learning Aggregates were instructed to individually choose "Relevant Others," that is, any organization positions or units with which more effective relations were considered necessary to do an effective job. For each of these Relevant Others, participants were instructed to develop "3-Dimensional Images" based on these questions:

1. How do we see ourselves in relation to the Relevant Other?
2. How does the Relevant Other see us?
3. How do we see the Relevant Other?

The 3-D Images were to be written on large sheets of newsprint. Each Learning Aggregate prepared its images in isolation.

The learning design in this case was complicated by a variety of factors. For example, only four of the five Basic Learning Aggregates were units of organization; the fifth was a categorical group composed of the specialties of various headquarter units. Moreover, the former units only recently were established. Such factors probably reduced the potency of the design. In general, we expect the confrontation experience to be more potent as each Basic Learning Aggregate is not merely a categorical group, that is, as its members share social norms and mutually identify.[2]

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[2] For a detailed analysis of such group properties, see Robert T. Golembiewski, *The Small Group* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

To the degree that a Basic Learning Aggregate possesses such qualities of real "groupiness," so should they be able to consensually validate and reinforce the learning of each group member.

Fourth, confrontation designs provide for sharing 3-D Images. This confronting-via-images is the first step toward mutually working through any relational problems. In this case, consultants scheduled blocks of time during which willing Relevant Others could confront one another. A consultant was present at each confrontation.

Fifth, confrontation designs assume that significant organizational problems often are caused by blockages in communication. Confrontations "free up" people "to level" in communicating, and thus set the stage for authentic interaction and for effective problem-solving.

Sixth, confrontations are short-cycle affairs. The confrontation design about which data will be reported here, for example, took some 12 scheduled hours. In contrast, a typical stranger experience in sensitivity training lasts two weeks.

Seventh, confrontation designs typically are seen as springboards for organizational action. Since such a design is typically brief, however, real limits exist as to what can be accomplished. We instructed participants to try to do only two things: to try to understand the 3-D Images communicated to them, and to seek some areas of agreement where mutually beneficial accommodations might be made. In addition, Core Groups were set up following the confrontations to work on specific organizational issues. These Core Groups were formed as a terminal training activity, some work was begun in the groups, and plans were made for future meetings.

The learning in confrontation designs does not have to be transferred or made relational, in sum. *It is relational.*

ONE APPLICATION OF A CONFRONTATION DESIGN: SELECTED RESULTS

The effects of one application of the confrontation design will be illustrated in two ways. First, the representative 3-Dimensional Image in Table 1 reveals that participants did not trifle with the design. That table reflects many unresolved issues. Some of the issues were surprises, and none had been admitted to public dialog between the parties.

Second, providing more rigorous support of the efficacy of the confrontation is an involved matter. Our primary data concern before/after attitudinal changes and derive from a questionnaire administered before

TABLE 1

A Sample 3-D Image by Regional Sales Group I with the Promotion Department as the Relevant Other

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A. *How Members of Regional Sales Group I See Themselves in Relation to Promotion Department*

1. Circumvented
2. Manipulated
3. Receiving benefits of their efforts
4. Nonparticipating (relatively)
5. Defensive
6. Used
7. Productive
8. Instrument of their success
9. Have never taken us into their confidence in admitting that a promotion "bombed"
10. The field would like to help but must be a two-way street

B. *How Members of Regional Sales Group I Feel Promotion Department Sees Them*

1. Insensitive to corporate needs
2. Noncommunicative upwards, as holding back ideas and suggestions
3. Productive in field saleswork
4. Naive about the promotion side of business
5. Unappreciative of promotion efforts
6. As lacking understanding about their sales objectives
7. Belligerent
8. Overly-independent operators
9. Not qualified to evaluate the promotions sent to us
10. Honest in opinions

C. *How Members of Regional Sales Group I Characterize Promotion Department*

1. Autocratic
2. Productive
3. Unappreciative of field efforts
4. Competent with "things" but not "people"
5. Industrious
6. Inflexible
7. Unrealistic
8. Naive
9. Progressive in promotion philosophy and programs
10. Overly competitive within own department
11. Plagiarists who take field ideas but do not always give credit

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From Robert T. Golembiewski and Arthur Blumberg, "Confrontation As A Training Design in Complex Organizations," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* III (Dec., 1967), 534.

and immediately after the experience.[3] Only impressionistic data about behavioral changes are available, but they are consistent with the pattern of attitudinal changes that seem due to the confrontation.

Expectations about intended changes in attitudes were not simple. For example, four of the organization units about which data were gathered were either represented at the confrontation by one participant or by none at all. No definite pattern of changes in attitudes towards these four targets was expected, consequently. For crude purposes, they are "control groups." And two of the remaining five units or positions — representing some 15 per cent of the sample — were perceived by the consultants as creating substantial "new business" during the design.[4] Before the data were processed, then, consultants distinguished three types of units or positions about which data were gathered and made three different predictions concerning them. Consultants distinguished:

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[3] For a more detailed technical report, see Robert T. Golembiewski and Arthur Blumberg, "Confrontation as A Training Design in Complex Organizations: Attitudinal Changes In A Diversified Population of Managers," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* III (Dec., 1967), 525-547. See also Golembiewski and Blumberg, "Training and Relational Learning," *Training and Development Journal,* XXI (Nov., 1967), 35-42.

[4] For details, see "Confrontation as A Training Design in Complex Organizations," pp. 529-36.

I Units which were deeply involved in the design, towards which the most favorable[5] shifts in attitudes were expected, as measured by pre- and post-confrontation administrations of the questionnaire.

II Units which had little or token representation in the design, towards which was anticipated only a slight drift toward more favorable attitudes due to a "halo effect."

III Units which had created substantial "new business" during the design, towards which the least favorable shifts in attitudes were expected. Basically, these two units did not participate fully in the confrontation. For example, one produced only a 2-Dimensional Image, neglecting to describe how they saw themselves.

In addition, three types of criteria-questions were distinguished *a priori,* for each of which different predictions seemed appropriate. The three types of questions are:

A. *Volitional Criteria-Questions* which tapped attitudes considered relatively easy to change (e.g., How much do you want to collaborate with Unit Z?) or attitudes deemed particularly sensitive to the confrontation design (e.g., How much information have you received from Unit X?).

B. *Objective Criteria-Questions* which tapped attitudes that could hardly be changed positively on the basis of the confrontation design, but which might very well drift negatively as people felt more free to be open about their attitudes toward self and others (e.g., What is the level of productivity of Unit Z?).

C. *Combined Criteria-Questions,* composed of 11 Volitional and 10 Objective Criteria-Questions, on which a general drift toward favorable changes in attitudes was expected.

These expectations may be conflated and summarized in a 3 x 3 matrix, as below. Interpretively, pre- and post-confrontation administrations of the questionnaire were expected to reveal that the most favorable shifts in attitudes would be reported towards the Deeply-Involved organization units on the Volitional items. On the Objective items, the expectation was that attitudes towards all organization units would tend to change negatively, and most sharply for the Unfinished Business units.

The pattern of attitudinal changes above was not only expected, it was intended. Designing for "negative" or "unfavorable" shifts in attitudes on the Objective Criteria-Questions may seem perverse, that is, but it is not. Basically, the learning design was a dilemma/invention model that

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[5] The terms "favorable" and "unfavorable" are convenient shorthand only. On the Volitional Criteria-Questions, attitudinal changes reporting a greater desire to work together are considered "favorable," for example. Lessened desire to work together is considered to be "unfavorable." On the Objective items, for example, changes reporting a lower degree of perceived productivity are "unfavorable." On both kinds of items, the directions of scales were varied on the questionnaire to inhibit the development of response sets. However, the data were uniformly processed so that favorable changes are scored (+) and unfavorable changes are scored (−).

		Types of Units		
		I Deeply Involved	*II Underrepresented*	*III Unfinished Business*
Types of Criteria-Questions	A. Volitional	most favorable shifts in attitudes	moderately favorable shifts in attitudes	least favorable shifts in attitudes
	B. Objective	least unfavorable shifts in attitudes	moderately unfavorable shifts in attitudes	most unfavorable shifts in attitudes
	C. Combined	strong favorable shifts in attitudes	slight favorable shifts in attitudes	least favorable shifts in attitudes

captures much of the essence of the dynamics of T-groups. Let us simplify grievously. Consultants concluded that members of the host organization had entered into a mutual-defense pact expressed, for example, in terms of unrealistically high but mutual public estimates of performance.[6] Lack of openness, in short, obscured basic organization dilemmas. The confrontation design attempts to induce the public recognition of such dilemmas via greater openness and risk-taking, by explicitly dealing with the "real reality" perceived by organization members. Hence negative changes in attitudes on the Objective Criteria-Questions do not signal a dangerous deterioration of morale. Rather, such changes establish that dilemmas requiring attention have been acknowledged. During a confrontation, that is, organization members are encouraged to activiate the "dilemma" part of the dilemma/invention learning model, as by seeing themselves and others as less productive than they were willing to admit previously. At the same time, however, the confrontation design encourages organization members to work harder on the "invention" aspects of the learning model. That is, the confrontation design is intended to favorably change the attitudes of organization members on the Volitional Criteria-Questions, e.g., toward a greater desire to cooperate in coping with organizational dilemmas.

The matter may be summarized briefly. In its basic intent, then, the confrontation design proposes to raise to public attention unacknowledged but real dilemmas in an organization that must be dealt with. The confrontation design also intends to induce greater commitment and effort toward developing inventions capable of minimizing or eliminating the dilemmas, as in the Core Groups built into the confrontation design or in the back-home situation. These two intents are realized, in turn, as participants accept norms for giving and receiving feedback consistent with the laboratory approach.[7]

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[6] Illustratively, organization norms prescribed vigorous applause following a presentation, no matter how bad the performance.

Table 2 establishes that these complex expectations were generally supported by attitudinal changes in the host population. The ratios in Table 2 are derived from changes in before/after attitudes of all participants toward each of nine target positions or units of organization, including their own. A ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that favorable changes in attitudes outnumbered unfavorable changes; a ratio less than 1.0 indicates that negative or unfavorable changes in attitudes were more numerous.

The data in Table 2 may be sampled.[8] For example, Deeply-Involved units attracted the most favorable shifts in attitudes, as expected. Favor-

TABLE 2

Summary Data Concerning Attitudinal Changes toward Nine Units of Organization, Based on Pre- and Post-Confrontation Administrations of a Questionnaire

			Types of Organization Units or Positions		
			Deeply Involved	*Underrepresented*	*New Business*
Types of Criteria-Questions	A. Volitional	Ratio +/− changes	14.00 (28/2)	2.33 (28/12)	1.86 (13/7)
		Ratio +/− Stat. Sig. changes	Infinity (14/0)	4.45 (9/2)	1.67 (5/3)
	B. Objective	Ratio +/− changes	.65 (13/20)	.42 (13/31)	.38 (6/16)
		Ratio +/− Stat. Sig. changes	.25 (1/4)	0 (0/10)	.18 (2/11)
	C. Combined	Ratio +/− changes	1.86 (41/22)	.95 (41/43)	.83 (19/23)
		Ratio +/− Stat. Sig. changes	3.75 (15/4)	.82 (9/11)	.58 (11/19)

N.B. The numbers in the parentheses indicate the raw number of positive/negative changes.

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[7] Golembiewski, "The Laboratory Approach to Organization Change: The Schema of A Method," p. 217, details these norms.

[8] Malcolm Parsons of Florida State University raised issue with the original classification of Criteria-Questions 14 and 16 in the Volitional Category. We are now persuaded that his instincts are sharper than ours were, as Table 2 reflects. Early published reports of our findings were based on the original classification and, if Parsons is as accurate as we now feel he is, they underestimated the impact of the design on attitudes. The ratios for All Criteria-Questions and for the Objective Criteria-Questions changed not at all and relatively little, respectively. But the three ratios for Volitional Criteria-Questions in Table 2 above rose sharply to 14.0, 2.33, and 1.86, for example. In contrast, the original ratios were 5.0, 1.7, and 1.4.

able changes in attitudes toward those units at a minimum were 14 times more likely than unfavorable changes. The other two types of units, in contrast, experienced approximately a 2:1 ratio of positive/negative changes. All three types of units, within a narrow range, experienced unfavorable attitudinal shifts on Objective items. Roughly, unfavorable attitudinal changes outnumbered favorable changes by 2-5 to 1. The negative trend was anticipated. As anticipated, also, the data do not even suggest wholesale rejection. Thus the Deeply-Involved units were the targets of roughly the same proportion of favorable/unfavorable changes on the Objective Criteria-Questions as the New Business units.[9]

As the summary in Table 2 suggests, then, a confrontation design imbedded in the context of a complex organization induced some of the same kinds of dynamics that are characteristic of T-Groups. The sharp favorable drift in attitudes on the Volitional Criteria-Questions implies that the confrontation attitudinally prepared people to improve relations that were not critically bad but which were of growing concern. At the same time, as the data on the Objective Criteria-Questions suggest, participants tended to describe their reality in somewhat sharper negative terms.

A capsule characterization seems appropriate. After the confrontation, individuals seemed more willing to undertake a task that they saw as more demanding than they had thought. This describes an orientation that is conducive to effective learning and change.

Without making too much of such data, more broadly, the summary data in Table 2 suggest the antithesis of a degenerative communication process. In the following particulars, that is, the data suggest an alleviation of the processes leading to interpersonal and organizational paralysis:

1. A as a member of an organization unit was encouraged by the confrontation design to *own up* to his feelings and attitudes concerning B and/or his unit in developing a 3-D Image;
2. B as a member of an organization unit, in turn, was encouraged to *be open* in developing a 3-D Image about A and his unit;
3. both A and B experienced a growing *mutual trust* as the amount of unfinished business between them was reduced by the confrontation design, especially as it provided that A and B share their 3-D Images of each other and/or of each other's organization units;
4. a healthy, self-correcting process can be set in motion as:
    a. A and B as members of organization units feel an increased *interpersonal competence,* that is as they experience a lessened *perceived risk* of recognizing and acknowledging their attitudes and feelings, their *processes* for decision making are less burdened, and as A and B can be more effective in their *problem-solving*; and

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[9] The data are not reported here, but individuals describing their own unit saw themselves just as "unfavorably" on the Objective Criteria-Questions after the confrontation as did others describing them. So the pre/post drift toward negative changes was not an "us good guys" and "those bad guys" phenomenon.

b. A and B consequently feel greater *psychological success* by mutually solving problems that stay solved without creating other problems; and

c. A and B become less *dependent* on formal superiors, and hence need concern themselves less with "tattling" or "not making waves."

CONCLUSION

Although data support the efficacy of one spin-off of sensitivity training, in sum, several points must be stressed by way of qualification. First, the data-trends in Table 2 probably understate the power of the confrontation design. Briefly, the learning situation was very complex in the present case, desirable "closure" often was not possible when confrontations were held, and some mutually-desired confrontations were not held because of lack of time. More favorable attitudinal changes should show up in cases where there are fewer loose ends.

Second, however, a variety of research is necessary to establish the specific conditions under which various consequences might be expected from applications of confrontation designs. For example, the results above strongly suggest one application was useful in modifying the attitudes of organization members. In turn, these *attitudinal changes* reasonably could be expected to facilitate *behavioral changes* that would (for example) improve degenerating communication sequences. No direct evidence about behavioral change is presented here, however, although various "soft" data strongly imply behavioral changes. For example, the history of the Core Groups was characterized by an excess of zeal, if anything. Specifically, some Core Groups attempted to engage in problem-solving in areas beyond their jurisdiction, against which consultants had strongly cautioned and advised. Predictably, superiors in the broader control system restrained some of the Core Groups. That superiors did so, of course, suggests that the attitudinal changes summarized above did induce behavioral changes in at least some participants.

Third, the confrontation design seems widely applicable, but some potential host organizations are not culturally prepared for it. No doubt, most culturally-unprepared organizations would be aware enough to avoid soliciting such an experience. But consultants still face a real responsibility of judging the preparedness of the host organizations and its personnel to profit from what is for most organizations a novel vehicle for exerting influence.

Should the consultant misjudge an organization's preparedness, however, the most probable damage is the loss of a useful opportunity for development. That is, the confrontation design includes a wide array of safety features. For example, the present design provided that only mutually willing Relevant Others would confront one another. Avoiding a confrontation perceived as dangerous or unprofitable would not be difficult, then. And members of an organization are very likely to avoid explosive situations. In addition, confrontation designs include a massive safety factor, the large number of points at which participants must make collaborative judgments about the degree of openness they are willing to risk. For example, the groups used in confrontation designs give each individual a range of resources which can advise against or support various statements in a 3-D Image. Elements of a 3-D Image are neither offered without conscious risk-taking, in short, nor without testing for commitment. And that is intended by the design. For we only can really learn as we risk and make real commitments.

Safeguards also inhibit taking the easy ways out, of avoiding a confrontation or of weaseling in the preparation of images. That is, any group developing a 3-D Image will be alert to the design property that watering down their image so as to guarantee safety may invite ridicule as their image is compared unfavorably to image(s) developed by others. The derivative tension is very real and seems to result in a kind of escalation of truthfulness in which the relative merits of openness and closedness are very consciously weighed. As it should be, then, a major share of the responsibility for the success or failure of a confrontation design rests with members of the host organization. They are, after all, the ones who basically must live with the results.

Fourth, no particular skills are required of participants in a confrontation design, but skilled consultants should be provided each time images are actually shared. Such a resource person can intervene if things go badly. Far more likely, however, his particular usefulness lies in encouraging participants to confront each other at "deeper levels." Our original expectation was that consultants could intervene if (for example) a Basic Learning Aggregate began roughly confronting a "weak" individual. The only individuals confronted, however, were the top organizational officials. They required no aid, although consultants did intervene to point up what seemed to them defensive reactions by these officials during the sharing of the images.